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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MASERU 000027

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SUBJECT: "ABC 1, 2, 3": OPPOSITION LEADER CALLS ON AMBASSADOR

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CLASSIFIED BY: June Carter Perry, Ambassador, EXEC , STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Former Minister of Communications Thomas Thabane visited the Ambassador the morning of January 12 and expressed his own concerns about instability during the electoral period. The Ambassador told Thabane frankly that she was concerned about reports that the youth league of his party might take specific actions since he had appeared on a South African broadcasting program to say that he could not be responsible for the actions of others. He denied saying that. The Ambassador also sought to determine why the former minister had decided to establish the new "ABC" party. Clearly his own personal disappointment at being moved from Minister of Home Affairs/Security to Minister of Communications was viewed as a demotion and lack of confidence by the Prime Minister in Thabane. Our conversation is part of our ongoing individual discussions with party leaders as well as our efforts with the rest of the diplomatic missions to reinforce the message of free, fair, transparent and peaceful elections. During the January 17 Martin Luther King, Jr. commemoration ceremony hosted by the Embassy (septel), Thabane not only attended, but made a statement that he agreed with all of the points made by the Ambassador in her remarks concerning non-violence, democracy and justice. No matter where he finishes (1, 2 or 3), we do not doubt that Thabane will come out of this election in some position whether his party wins or not; he has been a part of every government during Lesotho's 40 years of independence and an activist well before. End Summary.

Thabane Denies Encouraging Violence

¶2. (C) In a private conversation with Ambassador Perry, Thabane told me that he was very pleased to have the opportunity to meet with me at the Chancery to share his perspective on the February 17 elections. We, in turn, said to him that this, the second major election Lesotho has had since 1998, must be a peaceful one. We also expressed our deep concern about the rumors throughout Lesotho about the young people, many of whom have been attracted to his party, the All Basotho Convention (ABC), who have fomented or are planning to foment violent activities should they suspect any discrepancies in the balloting or in the final tallies. Thabane was quite concerned that these

statements had reached us and said, in fact, that there had been one young man who was a member of his youth league who had expressed the fact that he would take negative action should there be a question about the elections. However, Thabane stated that he had taken this individual aside and told him while he condoned free expression of opinions, the young man must not take any action that would have a negative impact on the peaceful process of the elections. He went on to say that he had delivered this message to all members of the ABC, not just the youth. At the same time, he said they would review the election outcome, have open discussions about them if there are any questions and would only resort to direct action, namely demonstrations, if there are any questions either about the process or the outcome.

Concern About the IEC

13. (C) In that regard, Thabane also said that he had not received, in his constituency, the correct voter list from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). The Ambassador explained that the international community was very involved in providing technical assistance to the IEC to help ensure that the list would be correct and distributed. We also shared with him the fact that an expert from the United Kingdom had flown in immediately following a call from the IEC Chairman to go through all of the computer systems and had in fact retrieved the hard drive with the correct voter list. Thabane expressed surprise at this because his party had not been privy to this information, and in fact, he noted members of the opposition had questioned why the international community was not involved. I took the opportunity to lay out for him the specifics of what the United States was doing through funding the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in terms of capacity building, training and media access during the pre-election period and what it would be doing in terms of assisting the IEC in validation of the outcome. I also apprised him that all of the diplomatic corps not only had individual meetings, but group

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meetings with the IEC. The United States, Ireland and UNDP, between themselves, have specifically identified areas of support, e.g. the Irish are paying for the systems consultant and the UNDP is providing technical equipment and transportation to the IEC as well as conflict resolution training. Thabane promised to explain to the members of his party the involvement that has actually been going on now for approximately three months among the U.S, the Embassy of Ireland as well as the other members of the donor community. He complained that the IEC had not apprised them of the support they had been receiving. He seemed reassured by the fact that we are deeply involved, not only with the IEC, but with the rest of the international community.

Revelations about Defection from the LCD

14. (C) The Ambassador elaborated on this point by indicating that the donor community had been having its own meetings as in 2005 during the local elections, would be holding round tables as well as holding individual meetings with all donors and stakeholders. These meetings would complement the ongoing dialogue we have with the IEC. The Ambassador then asked Thabane what specifically had precipitated his formation of the ABC and we believe we began to obtain clear insight into why he felt compelled at this time. Mainly, Thabane who had been Prime Minister Mosisili's Minister for Home Affairs and Security was moved over a year ago to the position of Minister of Communications. He said that he considered this move a demotion in light of the fact that he had been the person who had served as the interlocutor with the Southern African Development Commission (SADC) during the 1998 civil unrest in Lesotho and that his area of expertise was in fact law enforcement and security. He asserted that the police would be very active

throughout the elections and would see to it that there would be no violence. (Comment: Thabane's position on the effectiveness of the police is diametrically opposed to that of the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) who replaced him as the Minister of Home Affairs and Security. The Ambassador has been told repeatedly by the DPM in the presence of other major donors, as well as individually, that the police force is ineffective and that the Government of Lesotho (GOL) has had to turn to us and others, most recently to assist the police in investigating the murder of a Clinton Foundation volunteer worker. The Minister of Foreign Affairs on January 10 claimed to us that Thabane and the Police Commissioner, a woman, were in fact involved in an adulterous affair. The Foreign Minister has been saying since his own assassination attempt in 2006, that the police department has worked in tandem with Thabane and not with the GOL. End Comment.) While not divulging the contents of her conversations with the DPM and FOMIN, the Ambassador did express to Thabane that there were those who did not view the police as effective as he did and, in fact, as Thabane was aware, the government had turned over the years to Scotland Yard and the U.S. for assistance in solving murders which were never resolved, including political murders, which still remain open and had never been resolved by the police. Thus, though there was a basis for the lack of confidence, expressed Thabane, Thabane continued to hold to his opinion of the capability of the police, but admitted they needed further training. The Ambassador reminded Thabane that the Embassy has regularly sent law enforcement officers to Botswana through ILEA and has over the years sent the Police Commissioner to international police conferences in the United States and that the Police Commissioner has also benefited from U.S. assistance, support and training. Thabane said he was well aware of that since he had served in all of the governments.

What are ABC's Goals?

15. (C) Questioned about the ABC's specific goals, Thabane responded that he had formed the party because he felt also that service delivery by the ruling Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) had neglected to provide for citizens across the country. For this reason, Thabane had decided to run his campaign primarily from the mountainous rural areas where people are living in desperate poverty. He elaborated that while ruling party leaders will campaign concentrating only on their constituencies, he was concentrating on the entire country and has covered thousands of miles in rural villages across Lesotho to determine the conditions of the people and to "identify their specific needs." He said that if elected, he would emphasize the small scale economic and agricultural development in these areas that remain lacking in services. He talked about the fact that Lesotho lacked the necessary agricultural service that reached out to the mountain people. Joined by the DCM, the Ambassador brought to Thabane's attention the 2006 international

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study indicating that Lesotho would never be self-sufficient in food due to the long standing erosion of the land, although it may be able to identify niche crops, e.g. endives, that may be sold throughout the country and in the region, but would not sustain major agriculture crops. We reminded Thabane that water still remained its main resource and that if the GOL were able to successfully conclude a Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact we would be able to help address the water problem through strengthening the existing authorities, repairing pipes and other water systems. Likewise, we would be able to renovate nearly 100 clinics in the very rural areas of which he was speaking. Thabane said he was aware of the key areas of the GOL's Millennium Challenge Account proposal and fully supported them. We took the opportunity to remind Thabane that these programs, as well as the projects of other donors, could only go forward in a climate of stability and opportunity. He said he understood that completely and gave us his assurances that even should the government change, the technical work being done by core teams on the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) would

continue apace. I told him that I could not emphasize enough how critical that would be to our bilateral relationship and to our ability to support Lesotho's growth. In that regard, I reminded him that the President had extended the Africa Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA) until 2012, which should give Lesotho time to continue to work on economic diversification. Thabane applauded the work of AGOA and particularly the fact that it has impacted the Basotho population by employing up to 50,000 workers - a significant contribution with the unemployment rate reaching 50 percent. At this point, he thought many young people are flocking to ABC because of the lack of employment opportunities. As a candidate, his platform would pursue employment and business opportunities for the many unemployed young people. However, he did not give specific examples of how this would be done.

¶6. (C) In concluding our discussion, the Ambassador reminded Thabane that dialogue between ourselves and other diplomatic members and various stakeholders would continue. We also promised to address with the government which we have all done, access to government media as well as providing meetings for all parties. Thabane thanked us for our very active role in supporting Lesotho during the 2002 national elections, the 2005 local elections and the upcoming 2007 elections. He said that the ABC would be happy to participate in any roundtable discussions we and the donor community may organize and that we should be convinced that he is totally committed to a non-violent campaign, elections and post electoral period. He understood fully that any sense of instability would be detrimental to Lesotho's future, undermining progress that has been made since 2002. On that note, we concluded our discussion and he promised to explain to party members the specifics of international involvement, including that of the U.S., and explain even further the need for tranquility throughout the process.

Comment

¶7. (C) Thabane's candidacy has seemed to light a fire under young people across the country. We see this as a reflection of the socio-economic imbalances that exist within Lesotho. For example, the GOL contract with Imperial Fleet Services (reftel) and the resulting outcry has only underscored the huge gap between the haves and have nots. We agree with Thabane, having visited many of the rural areas ourselves, that their needs are not being met. At the same time, we questioned specifically how the ABC would correct this since there has not been a specific methodology outlined by that party addressing the economic, educational and health problems that plague all Basotho, but especially those in the remote mountain areas. We find encouraging Thabane's prompt understanding of the fact that violence would lead to significant loss of donor support and that regarding the 85 to 100 PCVs that Lesotho relies on to carry out their educational, health and community development programs, as well as the Embassy programs such as the Ambassador's Special Projects (SSH, DHRF, etc) programs, could not operate in a state of conflict between the various elements and people within Lesotho.

¶8. (C) We believe that Thabane's explanation of his discontent with the LCD reflects the continuing intra-cultural battle that plague Lesotho even with a population of just under 2 million people of essentially one ethnic group. These internal struggles hamper Lesotho's overall development and because the population is so small, many of the candidates and their adherents not only have previous political ties, but are also blood relatives. Thus, as an expatriate who has lived here for many years said to me once, you are dealing with the mentality of a "mountain people who are not forgiving." In this 2007

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election, through the entire training and capacity building that we and others are supporting, we hope to help Lesotho institutionalize the process necessary for a true democracy, one

that will be, as I stated to the November audience of donors and stakeholders, enforced by ballots, not bullets. End Comment.
PERRY